

Non-Governmental Organizations in Africa: The Leonenet Street Children Project in  
Sierra Leone.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide snapshots of observations, interventions, and processes in the day to day working of a child charity in Sierra Leone. There were 114 local and 49 overseas funded Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Sierra Leone in 2002. The Leonenet Street Children Project was founded in 1996 by the membership of the Sierra Leone Internet discussion group Leonenet. It is a non-profit, non-stock organization registered in the United States with the Internal Revenue Service and the office of the Secretary Of State, Commonwealth of Kentucky respectively. The Project was originally registered in Sierra Leone in 1998 as a non-governmental organization (NGO) under the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and the Ministry of Children and Gender Affairs respectively. Our work centered on foster-care, teenage-mother and child welfare and education, advocacy, and outreach. We also collaborated with government agencies and non-governmental organizations to provide one-time or short-term emergency aid to destitute children and families. The project was born in the hope that it would help the country to develop a national child-care program that will rehabilitate children through community foster-care and in which the needs of the whole child (emotional, social, intellectual, physical and creative) will be addressed. Unfortunately, this vision has not been realized because small NGOs have little political or financial clout.

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The new prominence of non-governmental organizations has some inherent risks (Broadhead, 1997).<sup>1</sup> They tend to be used by bilateral and multinational donors chiefly as aid auxiliaries. On the other hand, local governments tend to view them primarily as low cost service providers. There is a third risk factor relating to the perception accorded to NGOs by local communities. The latter view NGOs as providers of aid who themselves benefit from the circumstances that create a need for such aid. These issues and many more deserve scholarly investigation and analysis. However, it is necessary to document and assess issues and challenges which large and small NGOs encounter in the day to day functioning of their respective agencies. Such background information should provide some insight into the human interaction factor between NGO personnel and local community residents.

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The Sierra Leone Street Children Committee, an off-shoot of the Child Protection Committee provided the following definition for street children: a boy or girl below eighteen years of age who has dropped out of the nurturing environment of the family, lives in/on the streets without any care and fend for himself or herself to meet basic needs "Street Children" for lack of a better term come from a variety of groups including the homeless, neglected and abandoned. There are children from indigent families, runaways and orphans, and there are some in camps for persons displaced by war. Some children panhandle as a way of generating income. All street children share the scourge of poverty. They live dangerous and risky lives and are usually used and abused by unscrupulous adults. Many qualify for full LSCP Foster-care until age 18 or reunification with their family or relatives as long as they fully comply with LSCP rules and

regulations. It is important to add that LSCP assumed that voluntary contributions to the program will maintain an adequate level. The experience so far indicates that funds flow in initially, but dwindle as the life of the organization increases. The organization is now struggling to meet a meager budget because of donor disinterest or fatigue. However, we started providing free meals for some street and refugee camp children in 2003.

Non-Governmental Organizations. Is the term non-governmental organization a politically acceptable one? Nerfin (1992)<sup>2</sup> prefers the term “citizens associations” which act through advocacy, accountability or networking more than through projects. He opined that according to UN parlance “NGO includes aid organizations, business, commercial, and professional organizations. Generally, he continued, the term has evolved according to the Organization for Economic and Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1988) to mean ‘an organization established and governed by a group of private citizens for a stated philanthropic purpose and supported by voluntary individual contributions.’<sup>3</sup> Non-governmental organizations or NGOs have proliferated in Sierra Leone and other developing countries over the years. NGOs are not for profit organizations independent of the governments of the countries in which they operate. These organizations serve mostly humanitarian and community needs rather than commercial ones. NGOs range from large internationally funded organizations such as World Vision or the International Red Cross, to the small local organizations such as a “war amputee association.”

NGOs are part of a group of civil society organizations. Hinton (2002) defined civil society as a group in society that organized itself freely and independently and is ostensibly free from government control. He also suggested that the existence of a robust civil society may be a sign of governmental ineptitude.<sup>4</sup> Onishi (2002) wrote that NGOs are essential to Africa’s burgeoning democracy because “they provided communities the money and power to take part in their own development and circumvent ineffective or corrupt governments.”<sup>5</sup> Onishi continued, that on the other side of the debate, NGOs are regarded as the new colonialists who instill

dependency on Africans and their governments.” This dependency was accentuated in 1990 when western governments tied development aid to democratization. Around 2002, it was also reported that over seventy per cent of aid provided by the World Bank were given to NGOs who acted as implementers of these projects.

Another criticism against internationally funded NGOs is that its chief beneficiaries are educated and notable local and foreign elites, special interest group members of the developed world, and the aid bureaucracy itself (Hancock, 1991).<sup>6</sup> However, large – aid organizations have to project an image and maintain a posture. Their personnel are paid well and offered perks, which sometimes seem exorbitant to the governments and peoples of the countries they work in. Hancock (1991)<sup>7</sup> attacked this life style in a best seller in which he accused the personnel of large international aid organizations of self-serving behavior, arrogance, paternalism, moral cowardice, and mendacity.

The process of soliciting funds in the United States and Europe for the Project is a slow and frustrating one. Donor fatigue is affecting small organizations such as ours even with our effectiveness in the frontline and our low overhead. It appears as if larger international organizations are more effective in securing large governmental and foundation grants to help the poor in Sierra Leone. They have more funds to advertise what they do and attract more donors. Donors usually assume that funds given to large aid organizations will trickle down to smaller ones, or to the poorest of the poor.

Our operations are shrinking in 2005. The low level of donations and the loss of three versatile and dedicated staff members resulted in the paring down of services. We now support nine-children in foster-care in addition to feeding ten children living in the streets or in refugee displacement camps. We hope to expand the feeding program as funds permit in the future. Hunger and malnutrition affect children in Sierra Leone despite reports to the contrary by governments and large charitable organizations.

There is a dearth of work of genuine volunteers in smaller aid organizations who undergo deprivations just as their clients do. They live modestly, provide services voluntarily, and live on financial assistance provided by relatives, friends and religious organizations from their home country . Many of them depend on public transportation, and work irregular hours to help the poor. They all go beyond the call of duty to help poor men, women, and children. These are the volunteers of the ilk of Mother Theresa who are humane, nurturing, modest, and caring. There are many of them in Sierra Leone and LSCP volunteers and personnel are proud to be counted among their number.

The lavish life style and flaunting of wealth by some personnel associated with these large organizations appears to have created ill will between them and the Sierra Leone government. In 2000, the government of Sierra Leone passed legislation that will regulate all non-governmental organizations.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, the richer ones can easily meet the new registration charges imposed on NGOs. They have the resources to pay any costs. Smaller NGOs such as ours have to sacrifice sparse resources to meet new governmental demands. LSCP is working to comply with re-registration procedures, although this will take away funds earmarked for direct services to poor children.<sup>9</sup> Our major aim is to collaborate with the Sierra Leone government and other NGO's to alleviate the sufferings of the poor.

#### Activities

**Foster-Care:** Sponsorships of children in foster-care and providing food, clothing, shelter, medical and education assistance for children in the Capital Freetown. These children range in ages from newborn to 18 years. Eighteen years may be considered an adult, but in a country ravaged by war since they were 8 years old, we considered necessary to extend consideration to these young people who may need some help. Additional education fees were provided for children in the northern town of Port Lokko. Interim Care Center. This was a residential facility providing care for separated, abandoned children, small babies and children with special needs.

**Juvenile Justice.** We worked in the area of juvenile justice. The Children in Conflict with the Law (CCL) program provided monitoring and advocacy for children detained in Police stations in the Western Area. Field workers for child protection monitored cases and visited juvenile offenders twice a day.

**Vocational Training.** In the area of vocational training we provided combination skills training and day - care for child mothers. These programs were located in Kissy, east of Freetown and in Port Lokko in the north. The teen mothers received training in soap making, tailoring, hand sewing, and bread and cake making. Lectures were given on nutrition, reproductive health, childcare, and basic literacy/numeracy. Social integration skills were learned through conflict resolution, discussions, and debates. A community Child Protection Committee comprising elders, leaders, and parents was formed. Community involvement included participation in recreational gardening and soccer activities.

**Educational Workshops.** The Project collaborated in the provision of educational workshops. We collaborated with World Vision to present a workshop on “Community Capacity Building”. The fifty-seven participants came from several villages in the Freetown peninsula. Many of the ideas generated in this workshop were used for community development. For example, one village group used what they learned from the workshop to organize a maintenance project to re-pave an access road.

**Human Resource Capacity Training.** The promotion and development of the human resource capacity of staff is important to the Leonenet Street Children Project. Our staff grew from 1 to 26 in 2000. The majority were temporary contractors hired to deliver relevant services. Our staff participated in training and development workshops in topics such as first-Aid, computer basics, driver education, psycho-social and counseling techniques, and conventions on the rights of the child, non-governmental education code of conduct, and project planning and management .



Our work may fall under the area of “poverty alleviation”. The Leonenet Street Children Project directly assisted a total of 612 infants, homeless children, teen mothers, and community leaders during the year 2000 alone. However, there is a multiplier effect when material and developmental aid is provided that could not be effectively calculated. We suggest that if the benefits of our direct efforts extend to distant extended family members and friends, we could have easily and positively touched the lives of over a thousand people in any one year.

The following power-point presentation details real-life snapshots in the day to day dynamics of the project.

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- <sup>1</sup> Broadhead, Tim (1992). "Cooperation and Discord Towards Collaboration Among NGO's Aid Donors And third World Governments. In The State of the Relations NGO's/Governments/United Nations". In Development International Cooperation and the NGOs. 1<sup>st</sup> International Meeting of NGOs and the United Nations System Agencies. IBASE, Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>2</sup> Nerfin, Marc (1992). The Relationship NGO, -UN Agencies – Governments: Challenges, Possibilities and Prospects. In The State of the Relations NGO's/Governments/United Nations". In Development International Cooperation and the NGOs. 1<sup>st</sup> International Meeting of NGOs and the United Nations System Agencies. IBASE, Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>3</sup> Organization for Economic and Cooperation and Development Report OECD 1988.
- <sup>4</sup> Hinton, Samuel (2002). University Student Protests and Political Change in Sierra Leone. The Edwin Mellen Press. Lewiston, New York. Pp.39-40.
- <sup>5</sup> Onishi, Norimitsu (2002). Nongovernmental Organizations Show their growing Power. New York Times. March 22, 2002.
- <sup>6</sup> See Hancock, Graham (1991). Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Businesses. Grove Atlantic.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Government of Sierra Leone. (2000). Policy Regulations on the Operations of Non -Governmental Organizations. August.